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Political participation and civic engagement of youth

by Martin Turcotte

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Overview of the study

This study provides new information on the political participation of youth aged 15 to 24 years. It examines the likelihood of voting in the next federal election (as reported in 2013) and participation in the previous election, as well as participation in non-electoral political activities, such as signing petitions or participating in demonstrations or public meetings. The study also provides information on the degree of civic engagement of youth, which is often perceived as a key indicator of social capital.

- In 2013, 47% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 61% of youth aged 20 to 24 indicated that they were very likely to vote in the next federal election. This compared with 84% of seniors aged 65 to 74.
- In 2013, just over one half of youth aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 indicated that they were at least somewhat interested in politics, compared with three-quarters of seniors aged 65 to 74.
- Among youth aged 15 to 19 who reported that they were not very or not at all interested in politics, 25% were very likely to vote in the next election, compared with 63% of seniors aged 65 to 74 who had the same level of interest in politics.
- Younger people were more likely than older people to participate in non-electoral civic and political activities. For example, 26% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 35% of youth aged 20 to 24 signed a petition in the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with 22% of seniors aged 65 to 74.
- The proportion of "politically inactive" persons, defined as those who did not participate in non-electoral political activities and who were not very likely to vote in the next election, was 32% among youth aged 15 to 19 and 26% among youth aged 20 to 24, compared with 12% among seniors aged 65 to 74.

Introduction

The decline in voter turnout among youth in Canada and other parts of the world has received considerable attention in recent years.[1] It has been shown that the general decline in voter turnout is largely the result of a decrease in the voter turnout of youth.[2]

Exercising the right to vote, although very important in a democracy, is not the only form of political participation or civic engagement. Some authors have pointed out that low voter turnout among Canadian youth should not necessarily be considered a sign of voter apathy.[3] In fact, the relatively low turnout may be masking many other types of engagement—both political and civic.

This article explores the various forms of political and civic engagement of Canadian youth aged 15 to 24.

First, the article examines voter turnout among youth in the last federal election (in 2011) and whether they intended to vote in the next federal election (as of 2013). Voter turnout among youth remains a concern as democracy depends on the principles of universality and equality of votes. Furthermore, according to some political scientists, the interests of population groups whose voter turnout is lower, such as youth and persons with a lower socioeconomic status, may not be as well-represented or taken into account by elected governments.[4]

Second, the article provides information on various political activities other than voting, such as expressing views on the Internet, signing petitions, and participating in marches and demonstrations.

Lastly, information about the civic engagement of youth is presented, namely participation in groups, organizations or associations. These forms of social engagement are often motivated by reasons that are not political or social, such as interest in a sport or artistic endeavour. Nevertheless, civic engagement can have a social impact, for example, when direct assistance is provided to certain populations. As well, public participation in groups or organizations is known to have a positive impact on communities, in particular from a social capital development perspective.[5]

The data originate from the 2013 General Social Survey (GSS) on Social Identity and the 2003 and 2008 GSS (see *Data sources, methods and definitions*).

Youth were the least likely to have voted in the last federal election in 2011

In the 2013 GSS, respondents were asked whether they had voted in the last federal election. Since that election was held in 2011, results can be presented for those who were aged 20 and over in 2013 (and eligible to vote at the time of the election).

It has been shown that voter turnout, as measured in surveys, tends to be overestimated compared with the official rates.[6] This was also true for the 2013 GSS: among those who were eligible to vote in the last federal election, 81% reported having voted, compared with an official rate of 61%.[7] The GSS data, however, shows large differences in voting turnout by age group (Chart 1), like other data sources.

Specifically, 60% of youth aged 20 to 24 who were eligible to vote reported having voted in the last federal election, while that number was over 92% among individuals aged 75 and over.

Respondents were also asked in 2013 whether they intended to vote in the next federal election. Youth who were not eligible to vote in the 2011 election but who are eligible in the October 2015 election were included in this analysis.

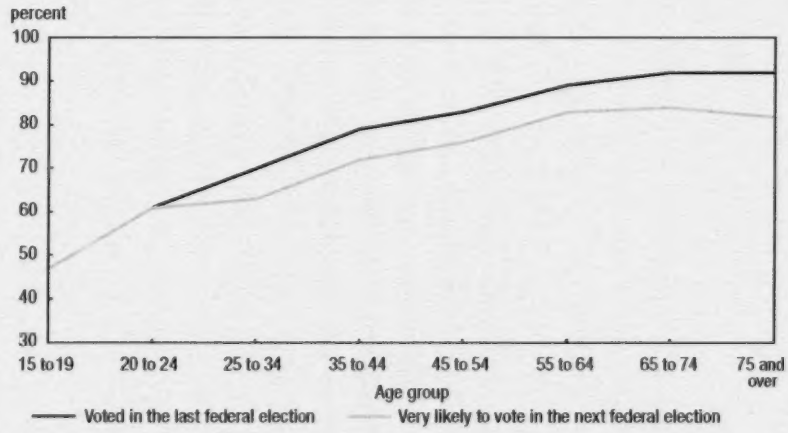
The prospect of being eligible to vote for the first time, however, did not seem to be associated with a higher intention to participate in the electoral process. Specifically, less than one half of youth aged 15 to 19 (47%) indicated that they were very likely to vote in the next federal election. This proportion increased gradually among older age groups, peaking at 84% among seniors aged 65 to 74 (Chart 1). The intention to vote in the next election then decreased slightly among older individuals, for whom health may sometimes represent a barrier to voting.

Factors associated with voter turnout

Various characteristics other than age are associated with voter turnout. Individuals who are more interested in politics, those who follow news and current affairs regularly and feel a strong sense of belonging to Canada are among the most likely to vote in federal elections.[8]

Such characteristics, however, are less prevalent among youth. For example, 51% of youth aged

Chart 1
Participation in the last federal election and likelihood of voting in the next election, by age group, 2013



Notes: Includes only persons who will be 18 or over in October 2015. Those aged 15 to 19 in 2013 were not eligible to vote in the last federal election.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

15 to 19 and 53% of youth aged 20 to 24 in 2013 reported being somewhat or very interested in politics, compared with 61% among those aged 35 to 44 and 75% of seniors aged 65 to 74 (Chart 2).[9]

The extent to which individuals follow the news and current affairs also varies by age. In 2013, 22% of youth aged 15 to 19 said that they followed news or current affairs on a daily basis, a proportion that increased to 55% among individuals aged 35 to 44 and to 87% among those aged 75 and over. Note that youth use information sources that are largely different from those used by older Canadians (see *How do youth stay informed?*).

Older Canadians were also more likely than younger ones to express a very strong sense of belonging to Canada.

The differences between age groups for each of these factors may help to understand, in part, why youth were less likely to say that they intended to vote in the next election. When the three factors discussed above were taken into account in a multivariate model (along with other characteristics),[10] the differences between younger and older voters decreased.

For example, without control variables, the difference between youth aged 20 to 24 and individuals aged 65 to 74 was 23 percentage points (61% and 84%, respectively). When the other factors were taken into account, the difference decreased to 15 percentage points (Table 1).[11]

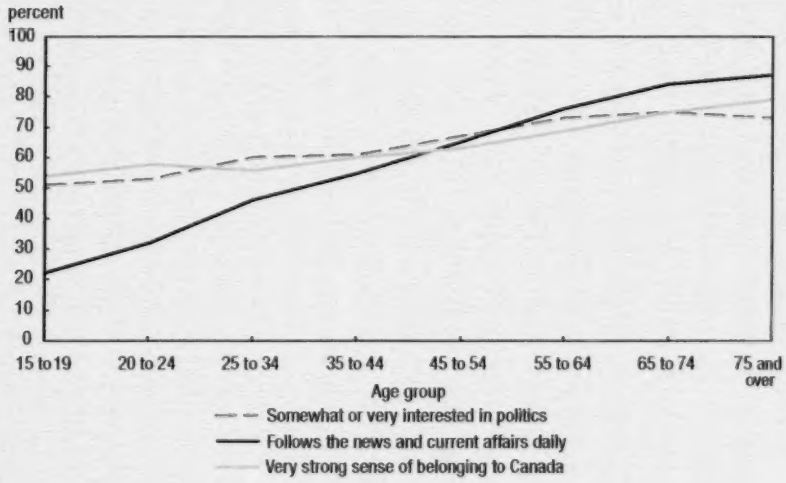
The remaining difference means, however, that much of the gap between youth and other adults is the result of factors not measured by the survey. One of these factors may be the fact that youth are less likely than older adults to consider electoral participation as a civic duty. Civic values have been shown, in other studies, to be strongly linked to the probability of voting in elections.[12]

To a large extent, the various associations found between background factors and voting participation applied to younger individuals aged 15 to 24 and to those aged 25 and over (Table 1). For example, in both population groups (15 to 24 and 25 and older), a lower proportion of immigrants said that they were very likely to vote in the next election.

For other population groups, the story differed between younger and older voters. Among those aged 25 and over, Aboriginal people (65%) were less likely than non-Aboriginals (76%) to report that they were very likely to vote in the next election. Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24, however, were as likely as non-Aboriginals of the same age to report that they were very likely to vote in the next election (55% in both cases). In 2011, the Aboriginal population represented approximately 6% of the total population of youth aged 15 to 24, a proportion greater than for the overall population.[13]

Some factors, such as region of residence, were more likely to be associated with voter turnout among youth, but less so among individuals aged 25 and over. Among those aged

Chart 2
Interest in politics, frequency of following news and current affairs, and sense of belonging to Canada, by age group, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Table 1
Likelihood of voting in the next federal election, persons aged 15 and over, 2013

	Very likely to vote in the next federal election					
	Population aged 15 and over		Population aged 15 to 24		Population aged 25 and over	
	percentage	predicted probability	percentage	predicted probability	percentage	predicted probability
Age group						
15 to 19[1] (ref.)	47	0.53	47	0.47	...	...
20 to 24	61*	0.67*	61*	0.61*	...	...
25 to 34[2]	63*	0.67*	...	...	63	0.68
35 to 44	72*	0.73*	...	...	72*	0.74*
45 to 54	76*	0.74*	...	...	76*	0.75*
55 to 64	83*	0.80*	...	...	83*	0.81*
65 to 74	84*	0.82*	...	...	84*	0.82*
75 and over	82*	0.80*	...	...	82*	0.81*
Sex						
Male (ref.)	72	0.71	55	0.52	75	0.74
Female	72	0.74*	55	0.58*	75	0.77*
Immigrant status						
Not an immigrant (ref.)	75	0.75	58	0.58	78	0.78
Not an immigrant, at least one parent foreign-born	73	0.73*	52	0.52*	77	0.76
Immigrant	65*	0.65*	42*	0.45*	67*	0.69*
Aboriginal identity						
No (ref.)	73	0.73	55	0.55	76	0.76
Yes	63*	0.68*	55	0.55	65*	0.70*
Household income						
Less than $60,000 (ref.)	69	0.69	51	0.50	71	0.72
$60,000 to $99,999	74*	0.74*	56	0.57*	77*	0.77*
$100,000 to $149,999	78*	0.77*	67*	0.62*	80*	0.79*
$150,000 and over	83*	0.79*	67*	0.63*	86*	0.82*
Not stated	65*	0.69	43	0.49	69	0.72
Province						
Newfoundland and Labrador	73	0.70	47	0.49	76	0.74
Prince Edward Island	74	0.73	56[E]	0.63	77	0.74
Nova Scotia	75*	0.74	49	0.46	79*	0.78
New Brunswick	72	0.73	34*[E]	0.41	78*	0.78
Quebec	75*	0.75*	64*	0.64*	77*	0.77
Ontario (ref.)	72	0.72	54	0.54	74	0.75
Manitoba	67*	0.71	50	0.57	70*	0.73
Saskatchewan	69	0.69*	42	0.40*	74	0.74
Alberta	70*	0.69	48	0.44*	74	0.73
British Columbia	73	0.74	57	0.61	76	0.76
Interest in politics						
Not very or not at all interested (ref.)	49	0.56	34	0.38	53	0.59
Somewhat interested	82*	0.80*	68*	0.66*	84*	0.83*
Very interested	92*	0.89*	90*	0.87*	92*	0.89*
Frequency of following the news and current affairs						
Daily (ref.)	80	0.75	69	0.60	81	0.77
Several times each week	70*	0.73	64	0.61	72*	0.75*
Several times each month	59*	0.69*	43*	0.47*	66*	0.74*
Rarely or never	46*	0.66*	34*	0.47*	51*	0.69*

Table 1 (concluded)
Likelihood of voting in the next federal election, persons aged 15 and over, 2013

	Very likely to vote in the next federal election					
	Population aged 15 and over		Population aged 15 to 24		Population aged 25 and over	
	percentage	predicted probability	percentage	predicted probability	percentage	predicted probability
Frequency of participation in group activities or meetings						
No participation (ref.)	65	0.71	49	0.54	68	0.73
Less than once a month	76*	0.75*	57	0.54	77*	0.78*
Once a month or more	76*	0.73*	58*	0.56	80*	0.77*
Volunteering in the past 12 months						
No (ref.)	69	0.71	52	0.53	72	0.74
Yes	78*	0.76*	58*	0.58	82*	0.79*
Trust in general: Generally speaking, most people can be trusted						
No (ref.)	67	0.71	51	0.54	70	0.74
Yes	77*	0.74*	59*	0.56	80*	0.77*
Very strong sense of belonging to Canada						
No (ref.)	64	0.69	51	0.52	67	0.71
Yes	77*	0.75*	58*	0.57*	80*	0.78*

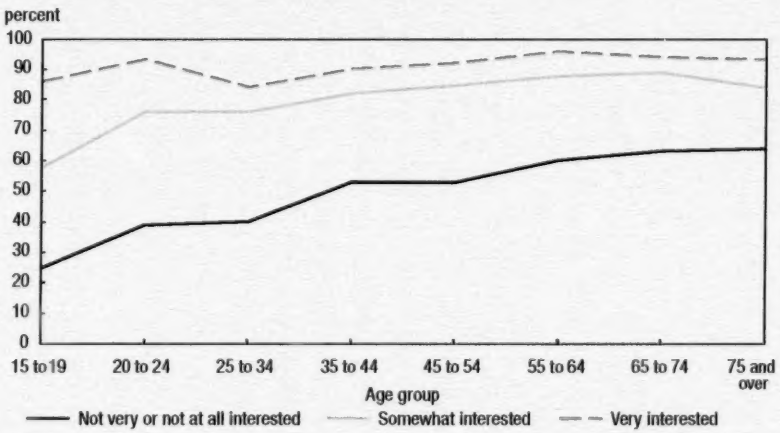
... not applicable
[E] use with caution
* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)
1. Includes only persons who will be 18 or over in October 2015.
2. The 25-to-34 age group is the reference category for analyzing the population aged 25 and over.
Note: The question on likelihood of voting in the next federal election was asked only of persons who will be 18 or over in October 2015.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

15 to 24, 64% of citizens living in Quebec were very likely to vote in the next election, compared with 54% in Ontario, 48% in Alberta and 34% in New Brunswick. Regional variations were smaller among those aged 25 and over.[14]

The relationship between interest in politics and voting participation also varied between the two age groups. This is because the difference in voter turnout between those who were not very interested or not at all interested in politics and those who were very interested in politics was significantly larger among those aged 15 to 24.

Regardless of age, those who were the most interested in politics reported that they were very likely to vote in the next election, with percentages varying between 84% and 96% (Chart 3).

Chart 3
Persons who reported that they were very likely to vote in the next federal election, by level of interest in politics and age group, 2013



Note: Includes only persons who will be 18 or over in October 2015.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

The results, however, were quite different among those who were not very interested in politics. Specifically, among Canadians aged 15 to 19 who reported that they were not very or not at all interested, 25% were very likely to vote in the next election, while the corresponding proportion was 63% among Canadians aged 65 to 74. Such results were also confirmed by the multivariate models.[15]

Reasons for not voting in the previous federal election

Another way to understand voter turnout (or lack thereof) is to directly ask non-voters to provide a reason for not voting. Only persons aged 20 and over are included in this analysis in order to focus on those who were eligible to vote in 2011 but who did not exercise that right.

Among youth aged 20 to 24 who did not vote in the last federal election, 1 in 6 reported that it was because they were not informed on issues (17%). In comparison, this reason was given by 10% of non-voters aged 25 to 54 and only 3% of those aged 55 and over.[16] This result mirrors the lower level of interest of youth in politics, as well as their lower propensity to follow news and current affairs on a regular basis.

A second reason, which was given more commonly by non-voters aged 20 to 24, was that they were too busy (12%, compared with approximately 11% of non-voters aged 25 to 54 and 5% of those aged 55 and over). Younger non-voters were also relatively more likely to report work or school-schedule conflicts as a reason for not voting (8%) in comparison with those aged 55 and over (2%).

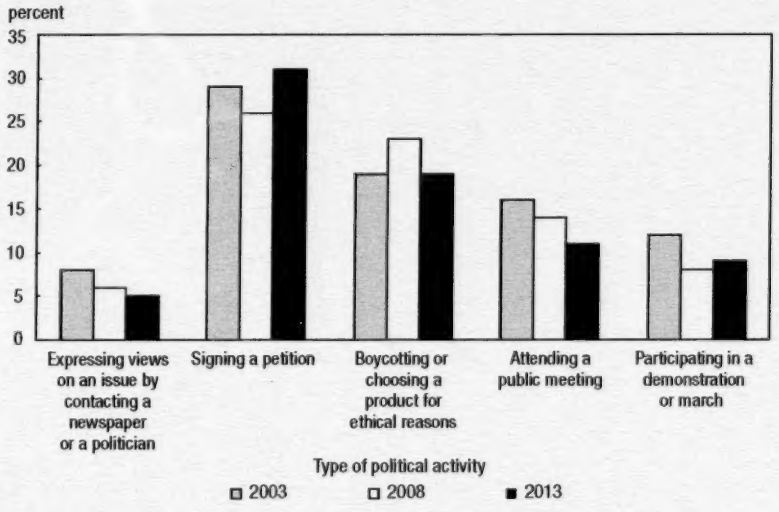
A relatively small portion of 20- to 24-year-olds said that they had not voted because they did not think their vote would affect the outcome (3%), at least in comparison with the 7% of non-voters aged 25 to 54 and the 10% of those aged 55 and over who provided that reason. Lastly, the proportion of youth aged 20 to 24 who said that they did not like the candidates or campaign issues was almost two times lower than the proportion for persons aged 55 and over who provided that reason (6% versus 11%, respectively).

Non-electoral political activities

The trends described above do not mean that youth are not interested in social and political issues. For example, an earlier Statistics Canada study based on data from the 2003 GSS showed that Canadians aged 15 to 24 were as likely as their older counterparts—if not more likely—to take part in certain political activities, such as marches or demonstrations.[17] Did young people aged 15 to 24 participate in such activities in 2013? And if so, how does this compare with 2003?

Between 2003 and 2013, the participation of youth aged 15 to 24 in non-electoral political activities remained relatively stable or, in some cases, decreased. For example, the proportion of youth who attended a public meeting declined by 5 percentage points, from 16% in 2003 to 11% in 2013 (Chart 4). There was also a decline

Chart 4
Participation of youth aged 15 to 24 in non-electoral political activities, 2003, 2008 and 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2003, 2008 and 2013.

in the proportion of youth who took part in a demonstration or a march, and in the proportion of youth who expressed their views by contacting a newspaper or a politician. That said, the general population's participation rate in these political activities also declined.[18]

Younger Canadians, however, remained generally more inclined than their older counterparts to participate in a number of non-electoral political activities in 2013. Some studies indicate that the forms of political participation popular among youth are characterized by (1) an emphasis on specific causes and issues (for example, the environment, access to education or gender equality) as opposed to the more general political issues discussed in an election; and (2) participation in social groups or movements that are less hierarchical and less officially organized (for example, interest groups) as opposed to involvement in traditional political organizations, such as political parties or unions.[19]

Signing a petition is one such activity. In the 12 months preceding the survey, 26% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 35% of youth aged 20 to 24 signed a petition, compared with 22% of those aged 65 to 74 and 14% of those aged 75 and over (Table 2).

Youth were approximately twice as likely as older population groups to have worn a badge or T-shirt, or to have held up a sign in support of or in opposition to a political or social cause in the past 12 months. In addition, 7% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 10% of youth aged 20 to 24 took part in a demonstration or a march in 2013, compared with 2% of seniors aged 65 to 74.

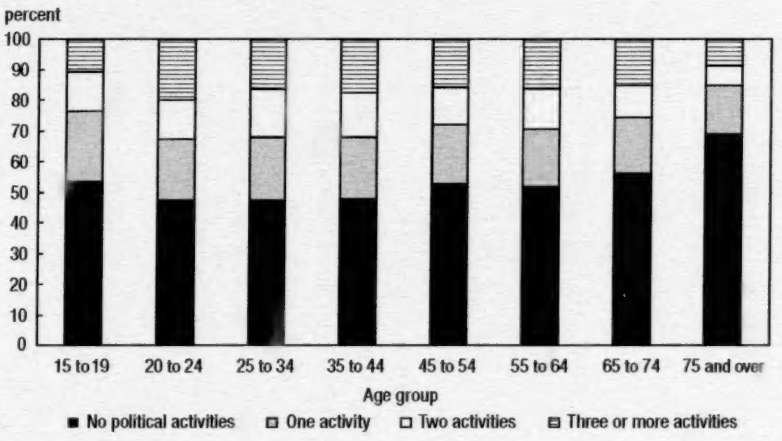
Additionally, 21% of young adults aged 20 to 24 reported having expressed their views on a political or social issue through an Internet forum or news website, more than twice the proportion for individuals aged 45 to 54 (10%) or seniors aged 65 to 74 (8%).

One way to measure the degree of activity among youth is to calculate the proportion who participated in multiple political activities in a given year. Youth aged 20 to 24, in particular, were more likely to be active, as 20% of them had participated in three or more non-electoral political activities in 2013—the highest proportion of all-age groups (Chart 5). The intensity of political activity, however, was lower among those aged 15 to 19, with 11% participating in at least three activities.

In addition, 47% of youth aged 20 to 24 did not participate in any activity in the past 12 months, the lowest percentage of all age groups. This proportion increased in subsequent age groups, reaching 56% for seniors aged 65 to 74 and 69% for those aged 75 and over.

Among those who did not participate to non-electoral political activities, however, older Canadians were significantly more likely than their younger counterparts to say that they intended to vote in the next federal election. Among those who did not participate in any non-electoral political activity in the past 12 months, 79% of persons aged 65 to 74 were very likely to vote in the next election, compared with 38% of their counterparts aged 15 to 19 and 45% of those aged 20 to 24.

Chart 5
Number of political activities in which persons participated in the past 12 months, by age group, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Table 2
Likelihood of voting in the next federal election and participation in other political activities, by age group, school attendance and highest level of education, 2013

	Very likely to vote in the next federal election	Expressing views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or a politician	Expressing views on a political or social issue on an Internet forum or news website	Signing a petition	Boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons	Attending a public meeting	Participating in a demonstration or march	Wearing a badge or T-shirt, or displaying a sign in support of or in opposition to a social or political cause
	percentage							
Total	**72**	**10**	**14**	**27**	**22**	**15**	**5**	**11**
Age group								
15 to 19[1]	47*	4*	13*	26	13*	10*	7*	14*
20 to 24	61*	6*	21*	35*	25	12*	10*	15*
25 to 34	63*	9*	16*	32*	28*	12*	5	11
35 to 44	72*	10	15*	30*	27*	16	5	11
45 to 54 (ref.)	76	11	10	27	23	16	4	10
55 to 64	83*	13*	9	26	23	18	4	10
65 to 74	84*	15*	8*	22*	18*	19*	2*	8
75 and over	82*	10	3*	14*	9*	14*	1*[E]	7*
School attendance and highest level of education								
Persons aged 15 to 24								
Attending high school	38*	3*[E]	11*	20*	9*	9	6*[E]	13*
Attending college or trade school	60	6[E]	14*[E]	36	22	12[E]	9[E]	16[E]
Attending university (ref.)	66	8[E]	27	40	26	13	12	20
Not going to school, high school diploma or less	43*	3*[E]	16*	27*	14*	11[E]	8[E]	9*[E]
Not going to school, postsecondary degree	64	5[E]	16*	34	27	12[E]	9[E]	11*[E]
Persons aged 25 to 44								
High school diploma or less	55*	6	12*	23*	19*	10	3*[E]	9*
Trades certificate or college degree	67	9	14*	32*	25	13	4*	10*
University degree	75*	12*	19*	36	35*	18*	7*	13*
Persons aged 45 to 64								
High school diploma or less	73*	8	6*	20*	13*	12	2*	7*
Trades certificate or college diploma	81*	12*	10*	28*	25	17*	4*	11*
University degree	85*	18*	15*	34	35*	24*	7*	14*
Persons aged 65 and over								
High school diploma or less	79*	8	3*	11*	8*	11	1*[E]	6*
Trades certificate or college diploma	87*	16*	7*	22*	16*	19*	2*[E]	7*
University degree	90*	22*	13*	35	30	28*	4*[E]	14*

[E] use with caution
* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)
1. Includes only persons who will be 18 or over in October 2015.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Consequently, the proportion of "politically inactive" persons—that is, persons who did not participate in any political activity in the past 12 months and who were not very likely to vote in the next federal election—was larger among the youth.[20]

According to this definition, the share of persons who could be considered politically inactive was 32% for those aged 15 to 19 and 26% for those aged 20 to 24. In comparison, the corresponding proportions were 17% for individuals aged 45 to 54 and 12% for those aged 65 to 74.

Education and political participation

Education is a significant factor in political participation.[21] Regardless of age group, a higher level of education is associated with increased participation in all types of political activities covered by the GSS.

The link between educational attainment and voter turnout is more difficult to study among youth aged 15 to 24 because most of them are still going to school. Nevertheless, there was an association between level of schooling and the intensity and nature of political participation. Younger Canadians who attend university, in particular, are more likely to be interested in social issues and are more politically involved.

Specifically, youth who attended university were the most likely to (1) express their views on a social or political issue through an Internet forum or news website; (2) sign a petition; (3) participate in a demonstration; and (4) wear a badge or T-shirt, or hold up a sign in support of or in opposition to a political or social cause (Table 2). Despite these results, the proportion of young university students who intended to vote in the next federal election remained lower than for the population as a whole (66% vs. 72%).

In contrast, youth aged 15 to 24 who were in high school were among the least likely to take part in various political activities, likely because of their young age.

Civic engagement of youth

The ties between citizens and society or members of their community are clearly not limited to political activities. Civic engagement, although not necessarily political, may also affect the well-being of communities and society. Various studies have shown that participation in volunteer associations can foster the political participation of individuals.[22]

The GSS collected information different groups, organizations and associations to which Canadians belong. A group may be officially organized or informal, that is, a group of people who meet regularly to do an activity or discuss various topics.

According to the data on civic engagement, youth are among the most socially engaged. In 2013, 74% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 64% of youth aged 20 to 24 were part of a group, organization or association (Table 3). This compared with 65% of individuals aged 45 to 54 and 62% of individuals aged 65 to 74.

Table 3
Participation in groups, organizations and associations, by age group, 2013

	Age group							
	15 to 19	20 to 24	25 to 34	35 to 44	45 to 54 (ref.)	55 to 64	65 to 74	75 and over
	percentage							
Type of group, organization or association								
Member of a group, organization or association (all types)	74*	64	65	69*	65	64	62	59*
Union or professional association	12*	21*	33	37	36	30*	16*	9*
Political organization	3*[E]	3	3	3	4	5	7*	7*
Sports or recreational organization	51*	36*	33*	34*	29	27*	24*	16*
Cultural, educational or hobby organization	28*	25*	17	19	18	20*	24*	20
Group with religious affiliations	15	11*	10*	14	14	15	19*	22*
School group, or neighbourhood, civic or community association	31*	23*	17	20*	16	14*	14	10*
Service club	5	4*[E]	3*	5*	6	8*	11*	11*
Youth organization	15*	8*	5	5	4	3*	2*	1*[E]
Immigrant or ethnic association or club	3[E]	3[E]	2*	3	3	3	3	3

[E] use with caution
* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Furthermore, the rate of civic engagement of youth increased over the decade (contrary to some non-electoral political activities). Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of youth aged 15 to 24 who were members of or participants in a group, organization or association rose by 5 percentage points, from 64% to 69%. The increase was even larger among those aged 15 to 19—74% were part of a group in 2013, compared with 68% a decade earlier.[23]

The types of groups to which youth belong differ in a number of ways from those preferred by their older counterparts. In 2013, youth were particularly inclined to participate in sports or recreational organizations; cultural, educational or hobby organizations; and school groups or neighbourhood, civic or community associations.

For example, 43% of youth aged 15 to 24 were members of a sports or recreational organization, compared with 29% of those aged 25 and over (Chart 6). Among youth aged 15 to 19, more than one half (51%) were members of or participants in sports or recreational organizations.

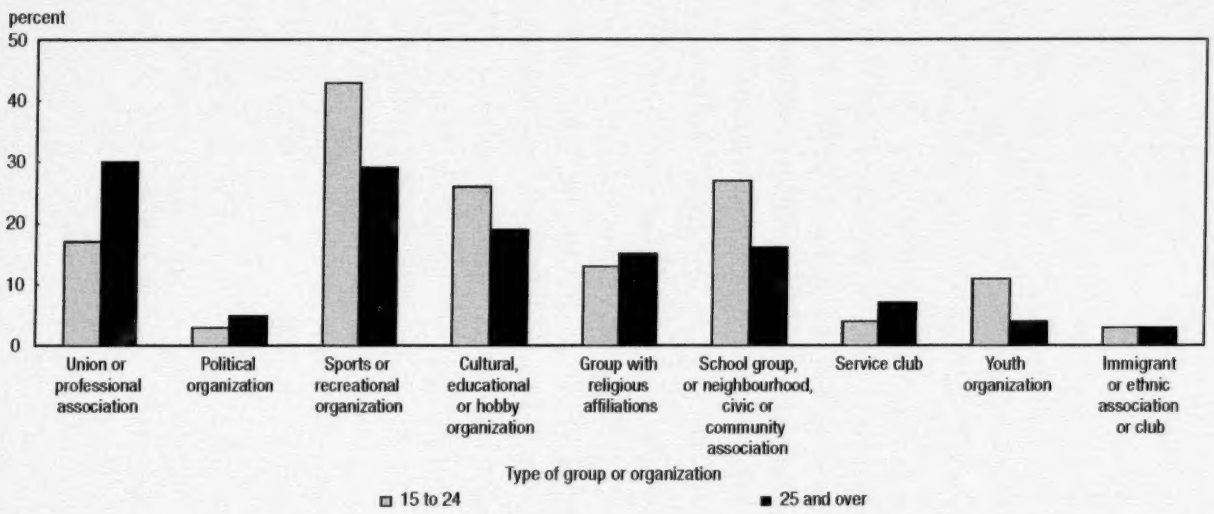
However, youth were generally less likely than older people to belong to a union or professional association (which is to be expected, since many youth are still full-time students), service club, group with religious affiliations, or political organization.[24] As a corollary, members of political organizations are aging quickly in Canada. Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of members of political organizations aged 65 and over increased from 18% to 29%.

Participation in group activities or meetings and volunteering

Youth, in addition to being more likely to belong to groups, also participated in them more regularly. In 2013, 45% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 30% of youth aged 20 to 24 took part in group activities or meetings at least once a week, in comparison with 20% of individuals aged 45 to 54 and 25% among those aged 65 to 74 (Chart 7).

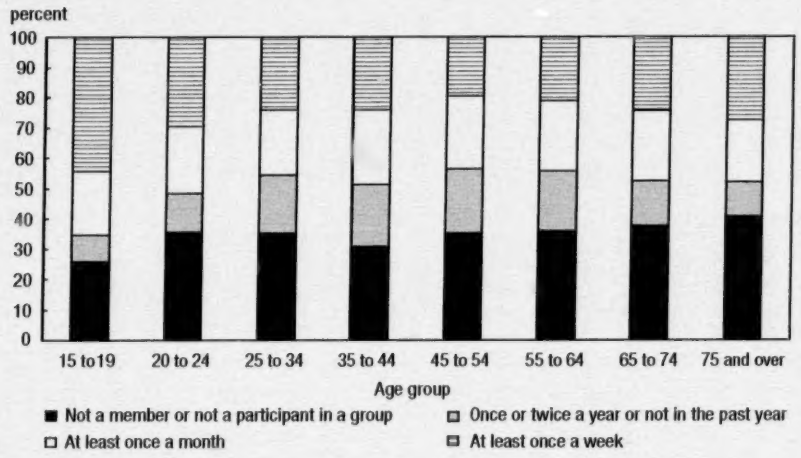
These differences in frequency of participation may have consequences for the development of social capital. For example, in

Chart 6
Persons who are members of or participants in a group, organization or association, by type of group or organization and age group, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

Chart 7
Frequency of participation in group activities or meetings, by age group, 2013



Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

2013, 76% of persons aged 15 to 24 who participated monthly in group activities had met, in the past month, at least one new person with whom they intended to stay in contact. In comparison, that proportion was 68% for those who participated less frequently in group activities, and 59% for those who were not members of or participants in a group.[25]

Lastly, volunteering is known to have a positive impact not only on organizations and their beneficiaries, but also on the volunteers themselves. As was the case with participation in groups or organizations, younger individuals had the highest volunteering participation rates. In 2013, according to the GSS data on giving, volunteering and participating, 66% of youth aged 15 to 19 volunteered.[26] This compared with 48% for individuals aged 35 to 44, who had the second-highest rate of volunteering. Young volunteers, however, tend to contribute fewer hours than their older counterparts.

Conclusion

This study, which was based on data from the 2013 GSS, has shown that younger people are less likely to vote than older individuals and are also less likely to report that they intend to vote in the next election. Younger people also tend to be less interested in politics than their older counterparts. These trends, however, conceal a relatively high degree of engagement in other activities. For example, many young Canadians are politically and civically engaged, but in different ways. The youngest of them —those aged 15 to 19—were the most likely of all age groups to be members of or participants in groups, organizations or associations. They were also the most likely to participate at least once a week in group activities or meetings.

Youth aged 20 to 24 are among the most engaged of all in political activities such as signing petitions and participating in demonstrations or marches. Young university students stood out in particular, as they had the highest participation rates for almost all these types of activities. In short, when alternative ways of participating in political and civic activities are considered, it is clear that a significant portion of young individuals are interested in public affairs.

However, the proportion of politically inactive individuals—those who did not participate in any political activity in the past 12 months and who were not highly likely to vote in the next election—was larger among youth. The lower voter turnout among younger individuals promises to be a topic of interest and concern in the coming years.

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Data sources, methods and definitions

Data sources

This report is based on data from the 2003, 2008 and 2013 General Social Survey (GSS). The target population consisted of persons aged 15 and over living in the 10 Canadian provinces, except for those living in institutions full time. The number of respondents was 24,951 in 2003, 20,401 in 2008 and 27,695 in 2013.

Definitions

Political activities: Respondents are considered to have taken part in a political activity other than voting if, in the past 12 months, they participated in at least one of the following activities: volunteering for a political party; expressing views on an issue by contacting a newspaper or politician; expressing views on a political or social issue through an Internet forum or news website; signing a petition on paper or on the Internet; boycotting or choosing a product for ethical reasons; attending a public meeting; speaking out at a public meeting; participating in a demonstration or march; or wearing a badge or T-shirt, or holding up a sign in support of or in opposition to a political or social cause.

Persons who refused to answer the questions on political activity were excluded from the analysis. They represent less than 1% of the respondents in each case. Respondents who refused to answer any of the questions were also excluded from the scale created for Chart 5 (the number of political activities other than voting in the past 12 months).

Members of or participants in groups, organizations or associations: When GSS respondents were asked whether they were members of or participants in certain types of organizations, they were given examples. The categories included the following: sports or recreational organization (such as a hockey league, health club or golf club); cultural, educational or hobby organization (such as a theatre group, book club or bridge club); group with religious affiliations (such as a church youth group or choir); school group, or neighbourhood, civic or community association (such as a parent–teacher or alumni association, block parent program or neighbourhood watch program); service club (such as the Kiwanis Club, the Knights of Columbus or the Legion); and youth organization (such as Scouts, Guides, Big Brothers, Big Sisters or YMCA). Respondents were not given examples of unions, professional associations or political organizations.

How do youth stay informed?

Younger individuals are less likely to follow news and current affairs on a regular basis, and when they do so, they use different media sources than their older counterparts.

Younger individuals prefer to do their own searching for sources and types of information that interest them by using the Internet, while older Canadians appear to favour more traditional media sources, such as television or newspapers.

Specifically, in 2013, among those who followed news or current affairs at least occasionally, 71% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 83% of youth aged 20 to 24 did so using the Internet. This proportion decreased among older individuals and was 13% among those aged 75 and over (Table A.1).

Table A.1
Rate of media use among those who followed news or current affairs at least occasionally, by age group, 2013

	Type of media used to follow news and current affairs				
	Internet	Newspapers	Magazines	Television	Radio
			percentage		
Total	58	49	17	75	48
Age group					
15 to 19	71*	37*	11*	62*	35*
20 to 24	83*	42*	13*	52*	40*
25 to 34	77*	39*	14*	62*	48*
35 to 44	70*	40*	15	69*	51*
45 to 54 (ref.)	57	50	17	80	56
55 to 64	49*	58*	20*	86*	53*
65 to 74	33*	64*	22*	91*	47*
75 and over	13*	69*	22*	92*	36*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2013.

How do youth stay informed? (concluded)

Television, which continues to be used by a majority of Canadians to keep informed on news and current affairs (75%), was significantly less popular among youth. In 2013, 52% of youth aged 20 to 24 used television to get news and current affairs occasionally. In comparison, the proportion was 80% for individuals aged 45 to 54 and 91% for those aged 65 to 74.

Newspapers, which were used by two-thirds of persons aged 65 and over, were used by 37% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 42% of youth aged 20 to 24 who kept up with news and current affairs. A similar scenario applied for magazines, which were used by 11% and 13% of youth aged 15 to 19 and 20 to 24, respectively.

The type of media with a slightly different trend was radio. In 2013, the rate of use was highest among those aged 45 to 54 (56%), but lowest rate was among youth aged 15 to 19 (35%) and individuals aged 75 and over (36%).

Notes

1. See O'Neill (2007); MacKinnon et al. (2007).
2. See Blais and Loewen (2011).
3. See O'Neill (2007); Norris (2004).
4. See Verba (1996); Gidengil and Bastedo (2014).
5. See Claibourn and Martin (2007); or Curtis et al. (2001). According to Putnam (2000), a large part of the decrease in social capital in the United States may be the result of a decline in civic engagement—participation in organized groups—of younger generations.
6. See Uppal and LaRochelle-Côté (2012); Bauman and Julian (2010). Furthermore, the people who tend to vote in elections are more likely to agree to participate in polls and surveys. The goal of this study is not to provide an accurate estimate of voter turnout, but to provide comparisons by age group.
7. Voter turnout data for each federal election and national referendum since 1867 are available on the Elections Canada website at http://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=ele&dir=turn&document=index&lang=e.
8. Education level is also an important factor associated with voter turnout among persons aged 25 and over (see Turcotte, 2015).
9. Note that, among youth aged 15 to 24, men were more likely than women to say that they were very interested in politics (15% and 9%, respectively).
10. The predicted probabilities were calculated using logistic regression coefficients. For each respondent included in the model, the coefficients obtained in the regression were used to calculate the probability that he or she would vote in the next election by setting the variable of interest to an identical value for all respondents. For example, the predicted probability for men is the average of the predicted probabilities of voting obtained by processing all individuals in the model as being male (but retaining the original values for the other characteristics of the respondents). The difference between the predicted probability for men and that for women is the average marginal effect.
11. An additional analysis using the Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition was performed. The analysis showed that the low level of interest in politics among youth contributed more than any other variable to the difference between the likelihood of voting for youth and seniors. The other two most influential factors in the difference in voter turnout were the frequency at which individuals kept up with news and current affairs, and the sense of belonging to Canada.
12. See Blais (2000); Raney and Berdhal (2009); Dalton (2008).
13. Statistics Canada, 2011 National Household Survey, Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-011-X2011026.
14. Elections Canada estimates by age group and by province also showed that youth had a higher propensity to vote in Quebec. See Elections Canada (2012).
15. According to the regression model, youth aged 15 to 24 who were very interested in politics were 2.3 times more likely than their counterparts who were not very interested or not at all interested (predicted probabilities of 0.87 and 0.38, respectively) to say that they would very likely vote in the next federal election. In comparison, the ratio was 1.5 for the population aged 25 and over (predicted probabilities of 0.89 and 0.59).

16. The age groups used for this section differ from those used in the rest of the article, because the sample sizes were too limited for some reasons for not voting and age groups.
17. See Milan (2005).
18. See Turcotte (2015).
19. See Norris (2004).
20. Persons who did not indicate that they were very likely to vote in the next federal election.
21. See Verba et al. (2003).
22. See Quintelier (2008) for a review of these studies.
23. That said, participation increased in most of the other age groups.
24. The lower participation rate of youth in political parties has also been examined in other studies. See Young and Cross (2007).
25. Similar results were found for the population aged 15 and over: 57% of those who participated monthly had met a new person, compared with 43% of those who participated less frequently and 36% of those who did not participate.
26. The upward trend in the participation rate of youth aged 15 to 19 was also noted in 2004, 2007 and 2010. Note that the rate may be influenced by mandatory community work. Numerous students must do mandatory community work to fulfill the requirements for a high school diploma. In total, 20% of volunteers aged 15 to 19 reported being required to volunteer, compared with 7% of persons aged 20 and over.

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